Unit 2   Positions Through Contextualizing

Part 1: Annotated Bibliography

① **Suter, B. (2021a) Parallel encyclopedia #1. Arnhem: Roma Publications.**

This encyclopedia is composed entirely of images sourced from diverse archives. It encompasses a historical trajectory that spans from the birth of human beings, through their exploration of the world, the evolution of technology and culture, to the formation of societies and publics. The original images, each a "slice of time", exist independently and in parallel with one another. However, in this new sequencing, they are linked through their "shared spaces" in-between: visual or semantic resemblances, such as a common shape, or a thematic or symbolic link. These subtle points of connection allow a logical "sliding" to occur between images, enabling a progression of narrative and transforming these isolated moments into a continuous, fluid process, where one can see a development from zero to one. This visual grammar inspired me to look for those "shared spaces" through which I can link the images in a more logical sense and potentially construct a storyline.

② **Calvino, I. (1978). Invisible Cities. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.**

With words and sentences, Calvino paves ways and weaves roads, building up cities and constructing an imaginary continent in the book. People in the stories are also building cities—and the book become a layered universe of multiple times, worlds, and spaces. I am fascinated by how this universe is contained: within a metaphorical container—the narrative—which is held within a physical container, the book. I become interested in exploring the relationship between narrative structure and the structure of the medium—how narrative can reshape the form of the medium, and in turn, how the structure of a medium might inform the way a narrative unfolds. In how many ways can a book, an image, an interface, be a container of a parallel space exists "elsewhere"?

③ **Hebdige, D. (1979) Subculture the meaning of style Dick Hebdige. New York: Methuen.**

In Hebdige's discussion on how reggae music appropriates African voices and Rastafarian elements in the postcolonial West Indies, I'm particularly drawn to how he interpretates such act of dislocation as a "geographical action"—by adopting cultural signs into distant contexts, subcultural members open an imagined pathway to a "distant continent". To me, this act symbolically subverts the established geographical logic; it is as if traveling across regions and extending a map by attaching new pieces. Such "map-spreading" like bricolage, for Hebdige, is a central mean through which subcultural members establish their own cultural geography and continuously expand upon it. This not only deepens my understanding of subculture but also sparks my interest in exploring such acts of symbolic displacement—such as borrowing and recontextualizing—both as a visual strategy and a conceptual tool for reconfiguring meanings of the materials I use.

④ **Ye, F. Works. Available at: https://funaye.com/category/works/**

Funa Ye is a research-based artist whose inquiry is centering around the grassroot visual culture in contemporary China. In particular, she has focused on investigating the relationship between subcultural groups and the aesthetics emerge through their practices, examining how the group

constructed aesthetics, and how aesthetics in turn influence and shape group awareness and identities. Though her practice is not directly situated within the field of graphic communication design, the insights she offers on visual culture inform my understanding of our position in graphic design practice and the critical role graphic design plays within broader society. Our visions are deeply and inevitably informed by existing visual culture, and we are simultaneously acting as active agents in constructing contemporary visual landscape. This dual role places a responsibility on us to closely examine the various visual phenomena that have been reflecting socio-cultural dynamics.

⑤ **Boym, S. (2021) The Future of Nostalgia. New York: Basic Books, a member of the Perseus Books Group.**

Boym's discussion unpacks the reasons of our emotional attachments to the past and our persistent attempts to retrieve it, which defines and gives a form to my subjective and abstract feelings of loss. Nostalgia, in Boym's view, is a longing for a temporal state of being—a "context" and a sense of belonging within a particular scenario. Such insistences of a particular moment are inherently "symbolic", and for me, the unattainability of those moments carries a sense of powerlessness. Yet the imagined, speculative, and thus ultimately impossible returns to the past, and similarly, the projections into the future, gesture toward what is absent in the present—perhaps this is where their meaning lies.

⑥ **Mori, M. (1994) Tea Ceremony. [Photography]. Available at: https://pen-online.com/arts/mariko-mori-and-the-tea-ceremony-an-illustration-of-gender-inequality-in-japan/**

In this series of photograph, Mori dresses herself like the characters from sci-fi films, appearing in various everyday settings, such as the street, subway, and office spaces, while documenting people's indifference of her presence. Her lenses, infused with techno-futurism and fictionality, sharply exposes the silence and numbness within East Asian societies. The stark contrast between her "strangeness" and the passive reactions of others generates a powerful sense of irony and challenge viewers to question: who is truly alien? Mori sees technology as a means of "transcending consciousness and self", which is an idea core to her practice. To me, technology embodies a futuristic ideal and sense of otherworldliness, which therefore also suggests a rebellion against history, therefor it is acting as a powerful critique to the reliance on, and nostalgia for, traditional values embedded within the oppressive ideological structures. In East Asian contexts, ideological controls are often legitimized through the construction of a historical continuity—sublimating the values of regulations and disciplines in cultural traditions, through which traditional virtues become a disguise and trope for the reinforcement of contemporary power structures. Such syndromes of East Asian societies have been central to my inquiry. Mori's project, therefore inspired me to employ science, fiction, and technology as critical lenses; I also began to consciously seek for deliberate alienation in my work, seeing my practice as a continuous search for strangeness and otherness, and a continuous construction of "outer spaces" as sites of critique.

⑦ **Song, Y. Yehwan Song. Available at: https://yhsong.com/**

Song is specialized in unconventional website design. Her works—which she terms "anti-user friendly" —are often made intentionally difficult to operate and navigate, or require unexpected ways of interactions with users. As an Asian designer, Song's construction of web space is also a reconstruction and re-imagination of East Asian identity within the Western context. Computer technology is very much a Western product, with many of its components and mechanisms encoded with Western culture and ideology—like coding language for instance, is primarily based on English. As a non-native English speaker, Song's mastery and subversive play with coding languages also challenged the cultural hierarchy embedded in the digital systems, reclaiming the autonomy of the culturally marginalized within online space. Song's process makes me more aware of the significance

of code as a "language"—one which is often overlooked as a language yet as communicative and political as all other spoken languages. This realization has deepened my understanding and exploration of images, from focusing only on the visual layer to start experimenting with the rewriting and manipulation of data structures and unearthing more possibilities from this process. More broadly, it made me recognize the necessity of engaging with languages that are not native to me: English, machine's language, machine's language built upon English—as a critical means of decoding and recoding cultural identity.

⑧ **Deleuze, G. & Guattari, F. (1986). 'What is a Minor Literature?', in Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature. University of Minnesota Press. pp.16-27**

Franz Kafka is a Jewish writer who wrote about the alienation in the Czech Jewish society in German language. Such a means, in which cultural minorities take over and utilize the "poverty" of their vocabulary to create a new expressivity and intensity in major languages, is defined by Deleuze and Guattari as "minor literature". This state of being as a minority within major languages deeply resonates with my own experience navigating "linguistic poverty" in the English-speaking world as a non-native speaker, as well as in Chinese society where many concepts are systematically erased under strict censorship. My design practice developed from these dual contexts has been one that seeks for alternative modes and channels of communication, while Deleuze and Guattari's idea reminds me not only to look beyond but also experiment within existing vocabularies and syntax that are structured by conventions reflecting broader systems of power.

⑨ **BohoWanying. (2022). Princess Butterfly: A Chinese Fashion Influencer in London. Available at: https://medium.com/@bohowanying/princess-butterfly-a-chinese-fashion-influencer-in-london-56b1112fc804**

Liu's practice starts from parodic appropriations of images drawn from both contemporary and traditional Chinese aesthetics. This exploration in image-making later evolved into the creation of aggressively feminine and exaggerated garments, eventually developing into a fashion brand which is put into mass-production and sold in the market. Her gaudy visual style is radically provocative towards the aesthetics and gender norms within Chinese society today, directly confronting the societal expectation of discipline and conformity. Rather than through overt anger, Liu employs play and twist as strategic tools of resistance, where humor, absurdity, and deliberate ridiculousness become more than a kind of rage but a new form of autonomy and self-empowerment. Liu's practice is based on an active engagement within fashion industry and Internet platforms as channels that enable mass reproduction and dissemination of images. This highlights the close link between design, identity, visual culture in the context of this information age, as well as the potential in these diverse mechanisms of transmission in maximizing design's influence in critical inquiry and social intervention.

⑩ **Russell, L. (2020) Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto. London: Verso.**

Russell reclaims the technical term "glitch" and reimagines it as a form of resistance—a productive malfunction that disrupts dominant systems of identity and power. It refreshes my understanding of the notion of the cultural "in-betweenness": not a fixed state or a passive escapism but an action of refusal that one could actively take as a strategy. This also profoundly shifts my understanding of my design approach, which was more about explaining ideas, or to put it in a metaphorical way, paving pathways toward meaning. With Russell's view, I start to see meaning not only as something to be laid out on a surface, but also as something embedded, hidden in the folds. My approach therefore becomes an act of excavation—exploring the undiscovered or hidden sides in existing communication and language

systems.

⑪ **Velden, Daniel van der, Kruk, Vinca.(2009) Metahaven : uncorporate identity. pp. 6-49.**

Sealand in *Uncoporate Identity* and the opening discussion in the book provide some of the most illuminating insights to me on graphic design. Firstly, Metahaven decodes the identity constructions of coporates through the lens of "branding"—a primary field of study in graphic design. This shifts my understanding of design not merely as a creative tool for communication, but also a knowledge system and a conceptual framework that might restructure our understanding of things. It also deepens my understanding of our critical position in graphic design: from the inquiries we initiate to the tools and methodologies we adopt, every stage of the design process involves decisions that generate ethical and political meanings, which demand us as designer to read and examine more closely and critically.

⑫ **Lyra-Wex, M., Wyn Evans, C. and Morris, R. (2013) Let's take back our space. Southend on Sea: Focal Point Gallery.**

This book catalogues images of male and female body gestures and highlights the contrast in the space they occupy. "Space" is often vast and imperceptible, but when a photograph become its container, it is suddenly measurable in a vivid way. The frame and boundary of an image give more perceptible dimensions to a space: scale, proportion, orientation… which, when an image is cropped, become even more concreate. The tension between positive space and negative space, blank spaces between two images, the alignments, become a metaphor of dominance and absence, visible and invisible. The scale of an image is the scale of its power; the spaces within images become realms where different dynamics resists against each other. When being juxtaposed, they become a statement that questions the power relationships in space. Expanded on this, can images also be a means to redistribute the ownership/form/meaning of space?

Part 2: Critical Analysis

Text: Velden, Daniel van der, Kruk, Vinca.(2009) Metahaven : uncorporate identity. pp. 6-49.

As evident in its title, the book *Uncoporate Identity* place "identity" at the core of its inquiry.

At the very beginning, it reveals a disturbing yet undeniable reality of this information age: our world is saturated with fiction, and our communication have become inseparable from it. The mythmaking form of identity construction has been commonly employed by coporates such as companies and states—the leading forces of all aspect of our society. They seek proxies for their needs and desires, claiming their legitimacy and authority. This form of "creativity", a violent and opaque logic of informing, is "a matter of design", which thus demands designers to critically examine the existing truths that design is always confronting, informed, shaped by, and deal with.

In positioning the prefix "un"—that of undoing and uncovering—to the existing term "coporate", Metahaven also positions their design practice as a critical and activist intervention that traces back, refuses, rejects, critiques those that have been produced and told, dismantling the centralized coporate logic. Throughout the writing, there is always such a message: fiction will make reality, as what they have quoted from Momus: "every lie creates a parallel world. The world which is true". This "word-making" is thus, as what are centered to their inquiry about information, also a form of "world-making". Through this symbolic disruption to the existing chaos, a new realm of design practice is created: design as unlearning, un-designing, uncovering those "latent vice".

All these ideas are unpacked in the first article of the book, *Sealand*. It documents Metahaven's investigation into the utopian and radical outsider practice of the Principality of Sealand, a micronation established by an ex-major in the British Army, on an abandoned military platform built by British government during World War II. It is an imagined nation exist as reality and operated like an entreprenerd project, the identity of which is constructed through imaginations: it imagined its own sovereignty, helps others imagining their identities, and, in turn, those imaginations ultimately become reality.

Locating in a grey zone outside of any existing territories made Sealand a refuge for those in exiles: from individuals seeking asylum, governments pursuing independence, to data escaping copyright restrictions. Through inquiry, discussion, and visual interpretation, Sealand also became a manifestation of Metahaven's position and methodology, in short, identity of their design practice: an experimental, autonomous entity, whose identity is more in its relational practice of others than under their own control, refusing and resisting against capitalist and bureaucratic logic. Thus, The Principality of Sealand could be seen as a "logo" of Metahaven that embodies their method and spirit; or rather, Metahaven is the Sealand of the design world——a design heterotopia with its own sovereignty.

The thoughtful examination on the entanglement between fiction and reality also prompts to me reflect on design, which are largely a form of "fictional writing". Design renders abstracted ideas into visible reality— but a reality made through fiction-making, which as a form of make-believe can be sometimes decisive. This is calling me to critically reflect on the complexity of fictionality: what does it enable or disable?

What also caught my eyes are the visual samples accompanying the text, all of which are covered with a transparent watermark: "specimen". Such watermarks are usually used to prove authenticity or assert ownership. Here, applied to images from unknown internet sources, it paradoxically claims the uncertain as real, which again, echoes and deepens the discussion of the blurred boundary between fiction and reality.

Throughout the writing, political discourse is situated within the framework of design, being viewed and analyzed through a design lens, and described using design vocabulary. For example, Sealand's management of its historical record is termed "brand management. This shifts my understanding of design from a communicative tool to a unique mode of thinking—a conceptual framework that enable us to dissect and question various forms of information, beliefs systems, and structures existing both within and beyond design discipline. This book encompasses rich, diverse, yet interrelated themes: politics, identity design, information, digital culture……As mentioned by the author, boundaries between design and other

disciplines are dissolving, therefore design can actively engage in dialogues with other discourses.

Further, Metahaven articulates the purpose, rationale, and methodology of their inquiry and practice with great clarity and details, supported with facts and evidence, making their positions powerful and convincing. These are not "justification" of their position but sincere declarations of it, which also aligns with their idea of "un-coporate": unpacking all motivations, instead of mystifying as how coporate logic tends to do. This is inspiring to reflect on my own design positionality: designers do not need to design for themselves and sublimate their design identity through mythical narratives; the designer's own practice—the subject and methodology of inquiry—are all powerful statements of that identity.

Practice: Ye, F. Works. Available at: https://funaye.com/category/works/

Funa Ye is a Chinese visual artist and researcher based in London. Her research-led practice centers on investigating vernacular aesthetics embedded in everyday life of contemporary China, with a focus on alternative visual cultures that are often developed from the grassroots and "outsider" communities.

Visual forms of expression and communication—including viewing apparatus, tools, aesthetics, and styles—all these various ways of "seeing and being seen" are central to Ye's inquiries. She explores them both as subjects of investigation and methods of articulation. Her recent projects delve into topics such as subcultural fashion styles, short video trends online, camera apps and the aesthetic trends derive from them, and craft practices among ethnic minority women. She is interested in unraveling how these choices are shaped and informed, tracing their significance within China's contemporary society, ideology, and its historical background in collectivism.

Ye examines the complexity of these diverse identities and responds through a variety of media. Formally, she embraces the "law and earthy" aesthetics emerging from grassroots creativity, developing a distinctive visual language characterized by the often flamboyant and maximalist elements drawn from subcultural aesthetics. In this way, Ye's body of works functions as a form of "visual archeology" that preserves the evolving visual landscape of alternative cultures while being a visual statement that offers a poignant reflection on identity, class, and cultural resistance in China today. In adopting the shared language rooted in the collective memory and lived experiences of marginalized communities, Ye fosters a visual bound with vernacular publics. Her work sometimes celebrates their vibrant creativity, sometimes questions their dislocations from mainstream society. In either case, the visual quality of her work always clearly states her artistic position: not in line with "high culture" standards, instead, challenging them while simultaneously empowering the grassroot and DIY spirits. Often employing a humorous tone, her works also put forward subtle critiques to dominant aesthetic paradigms.

Ye's works span video, web art, to interactive media and installation. Through exhibition curation, collaboration with local communities, participatory events, and publishing projects, she also actively explores ways to expand and deepen those discourses within broader social and cultural contexts.

Her works often take the form of visual arhicve and storytelling, the narrative of which are all summarized and translated from the direct, first-hand experience that are based on her deep interaction and interview with different communities in filed research. This locality makes her work a kind of archeology integrating ethnography, anthropology, sociology and the narrative perspective of art. Therefore, her practice is also socially engaged activism and a powerful intervention in the contemporary visual landscape. As designers, we can learn from her the importance of situating our work more within its context, learning from and reciprocate with the public sphere that shape our work. This reflective and interventionist approach to research is precisely the direction I seek to pursue.

Focusing on the subcultural phenomena in contemporary China, Ye's practice is largely in the same context to mine, therefore provides valuable reference for me in analyzing and engaging with my topics. At the same time, her approach to style, symbols, images offer valuable perspectives that help me to re-examine our making of image in graphic communication design. Design is constantly creating new symbol systems and visual grammars; we are actively shaping our daily visual landscape and shared memory.

From Ye's inquiry on different cultural community, what I have learnt the most is how visual culture acts as a medium and bond for social relationships and kinships, greatly influencing group awareness and community building. Therefore, I want to further study about this connective power of visual culture and explore ways to foster more inclusive cultural communities through the development of visual vocabularies.